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Brexit Referendum: first reactions from anthropology

My immediate reaction to the results of the British Referendum on leaving or remaining in the EU was to remember Alexei Yurchak's book, *Everything was forever, until it was no more* (Yurchak 2006). In the book, Yurchak describes the feeling of many people in Russia when the Soviet Union broke up: it came as a complete shock because they thought it would never happen; but once it had happened, it was not really a surprise at all. The United Kingdom has had a tempestuous relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC) and then the European Union (EU), ever since it joined in 1973.

The discussions against this huge European border experiment (one of the most radical border experiments I can think of) have been unceasing, and came from left and right (and of course from anarchists), from the centre and the peripheries, from populists and internationalists. Those in favour of whatever 'Europe' might mean were always much less newsworthy. Anthropologists were among many who lined up to critique everything about the politics, economics, ideology, structure and especially the bureaucracy of the EU (and some of them have contributed to this Forum).

Yet once the referendum result was published, I realised that there is also much material in my field notes that shows that people did not really *mean* that the EU should cease to exist. Like the constant complaints against the habits of one's closest kin, roiling against the EU is serious, but it does not really mean disavowal or divorce. Until, apparently, it does.

This Forum represents the immediate reactions of 24 colleagues in anthropology about 'Brexit'. The commentaries were all written within five days of the news coming out. Apart from having to trim the texts for space reasons, they have been left as they are, documents of immediate, often raw, reactions. In that sense, these texts are as much witness statements as they are observations; as much an echo chamber of all the endless discussion that came in the aftermath of the result as it is considered observation; as much an emotional reaction as it is analysis. I did ask all contributors to think about how to engage their knowledge of anthropology in addressing this issue. As their responses describe, there are many hugely serious and frankly alarming political, economic and ideological challenges facing both Europe and the world at the moment that have become entangled with Brexit. So this is not the time to sit back and say nothing. Others have been speaking out too, of course, including Felix Stein's

commentary in the APLA blog.¹ The point of bringing all these voices together in this Forum, within the pages of the *European Association of Social Anthropology's* journal, *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, is to draw out the knots, tangles, double-binds, ambivalences and tensions involved in thinking about events such as Brexit anthropologically. It reveals a panoply of concerns, approaches, thoughts and responses. In some small way, it might help to make a difference.

Sarah Green

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Reference

Yurchak, A. 2006. *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bewilderment

I guess like most people I am totally bewildered by it all. Is it a major political and economic upheaval or will it be a minor blip in the madness that is 'business as usual' these days? My gut feeling is that the politics of inequality is catching up with the economics of inequality and that the 99% are giving voice to grievances that the hard right are exploiting to the nth degree. (Personal communication, 27 June 2016)

Chris Gregory

Australian National University

Democracy on speed

The question, when it came, was striking in its simplicity: 'should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' Two boxes. No caveats, no footnotes, definitely no White Paper. This was bare-knuckle democracy, fought in the soundbite age. £350 million per week for the NHS! 80 million Turks threatening our jobs! Reclaim our borders! Take back control!

A referendum channels an extraordinarily complex, differentiated population into a fictive singularity: The People. This is The People as oracle; as collective coin-flipper. Its verdict is not delivered in the equivocal language of swings and parliamentary seats. Like the *benge* fowl that lives or dies, the referendum deals only in binaries: it is a guillotine to representative democracy's rough-edged saw. No wonder that when the Leave announcement was finally delivered it felt giddily unreal, as though we had not known our own force and were shocked at the blood now splattered on the carpet. To an electorate schooled in the convoluted first-past-the-post system of representative government there was something intoxicating about the referendum's simplicity and its violence. For a fleeting moment, The People really were sovereign.

1 <https://politicalandlegalanthro.org/2016/06/28/anthropology-brexite-and-xenophobia-in-europe/>
Accessed 29 June 2016.

But what is a referendum, anthropologically speaking? We could look it, following Coles (2007), as a socio-material apparatus for producing particular political facts. It is an apparatus, along with the secret ballot and the televised delivery of results, for translating political interests into singular decisions. Its unique force lies in its claims to encompassment and its capacity to reduce complexity into a singular decision.

A referendum is a political technology for cutting the network (e.g. the exclusion of all UK citizens who are long-term EU residents from being The People). But it is also more than this, for reasons that help explain its popularity in the current European moment of populist politics. Presented in the Brexit form, a referendum is the ultimate neoliberal hat-trick, producing the illusion of perfect choice and unconstrained agency (You decide! Stay or Go!) even as the question was determined by a micro-elite to resolve an internal party spat. Its simplicity also conceals a fallacy at its core: for without the qualifications and footnotes none of us can possibly know what we are voting *for* in voting to leave. The referendum is a form of magical politics for a digital, post-political age. Even the form in which the question is posed on the ballot paper mirrors TV quiz-show questions about a hypothetical future: Immigration or the Economy? Bank your earnings, or take a risk on more? Box A or Box B?

This is roulette democracy; democracy on speed. Gove's 'who cares about experts?' shoulder shrug when confronted with inconvenient facts shouldn't surprise us: for the referendum's claim to superiority lies precisely in its celebration of the *demos* over the elected politician. That is why referenda are so beloved of populist politicians everywhere: we need only think of Putin's annexation of Crimea, justified through a referendum in 2014. Putin is the past master of this political game.

The twist in this case, as with all roulette spins, is that the outcome is never certain. The ballot presents the illusion of choice, but the politicians who set the terms of the referendum also have only the illusion of control. 'The People' is a fickle thing. In this case, the Leave campaign's call to 'take back control' has given form and solidity to undercurrents of fear, disillusion and xenophobia that won't easily now be contained.

Madeline Reeves

University of Manchester

Reference

Coles, K. 2007. *Democratic designs: international intervention and democratic practices in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Democracy at stake: Grexit, Brexit

For me, the UK referendum story began a year ago with another referendum: that of Greece. Elected in January 2015 on a promise to end austerity, throughout the spring the SYRIZA government was pressured by the Troika (the EU, the European Central Bank and the IMF) to accept ever harsher and ill-targeted cuts to public spending in exchange for the next bailout. Pushed to the limit, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras walked out of negotiations and called a referendum, declaring that Greeks must decide whether they were willing to accept the 'impossible' terms he had been offered. In cafes, in kitchens, standing in queues for the ATM to withdraw their daily maximum of 60 euros cash, Greeks debated: 'yes' or 'no'? As the days passed, the question to which these

were possible answers became less clear; a desperate ‘yes’ campaign claimed it was about choosing to stay in ‘Europe’ rather than simply the Eurozone, while several European finance ministers threatened that a ‘no’ would provoke Greece’s eviction: Grexit. On referendum day (5 July 2015), Greeks responded defiantly to this attempted blackmail: 62% voted ‘No!’ and for a week, euphoria reigned. Then, in a tumultuous 24-hour negotiation, Tsipras was ‘waterboarded’ into accepting a deal even worse than the one his fellow citizens had rejected. Refusal, he judged, was politically impossible: Greeks feel European and at the time, over 80% supported EU membership, whatever the price.

The lesson I took from that scenario was that European finance ministers were all too willing to jettison ‘solidarity’ and push Greece to the wall with austerity policies that everybody knew from the start simply do not work. Neoliberalism easily trumped Social Europe; SYRIZA’s alternative path would not be tolerated. The other component of the so-called ‘Greek crisis’ has been, in the words of Dimitris Christopoulos, a ‘reception crisis’ for Europe, not a ‘refugee crisis’. With a few honourable exceptions, EU member governments have preferred to keep refugees out, or keep them corralled in Greece and Italy, rather than to offer them hospitality.

I’m hardly starry-eyed about the EU. It badly needs reform. But I have been persuaded that the ‘critical in’ position of much of the European Left, advocating for a People’s Europe and mobilising for democratic reform from below, is our best hope. Clearly, the hunger for democracy and the desire to be listened to is widespread in the UK, as elsewhere. The UK referendum tapped into these sentiments, though not always in the ways I would have wished. I started noticing in the final days of the campaign how much Brexit leaders like Boris Johnson talked about ‘democracy’, and indeed, the ‘taking back control’ wasn’t (as I’d first assumed) about – or not *only* about – ‘control of borders’; it was also about ‘control of our own affairs’, ‘democratic control’. Such a clever move: to capture for the Brexit side the hurrah-word ‘democracy’, a word that holds real attraction for people who have been abandoned. Only ... they are now going to be even more abandoned by those they have voted to lead them. I watch, impressed and disturbed, as ‘democracy’ is appropriated for profoundly undemocratic ends.

Jane K. Cowan
University of Sussex

Europe’s metacolonial reckoning: thinking Brexit at the margins

Referenda can be sad affairs. This time last year, I was in Greece discussing with friends their referendum. It was a difficult visit with many painful conversations. Most were about what the EU meant, what might Grexit have meant, and the way material security was rapidly vanishing: having a decent salary, a job, money in the bank, valuables in bank deposit boxes; also knowing that trash would be collected, cars would run, food would be available. The conversations revealed a profound conceptual insecurity. Nobody knew what had happened. When Tsipras ‘renegotiated’ the agreement post-referendum, he accepted even worse (seeming to many, punitive) terms. Both the no and yes camps scored moral victories, but both had lost economically and socially. In

Greece last year, nobody really knew what the referendum had been about: the memorandum, Grexit or European identity? The most painful part was the creeping populism from which we often drew.

Affectively, the British referendum seems similar. Conceptual insecurity is also present. The enmity with which the Commission seems to be responding is also hard to miss. The vehement, and lethal, nationalism fanned during the campaign is set to rise, and not necessarily on account of Scotland and Northern Ireland.

That brings me to the Cyprus referendum in 2004, where the question concerned the island's unification into a federal system. It had been asked in light of impending EU accession, but the acceptance of a federal settlement had not been tied to EU entry, as originally envisioned. People were not quite sure what was voted down – the specific agreement, any prospective agreement or a Europe shared with Turkish-Cypriots? So Cyprus entered, the EU *acquis* was suspended in the north (under 'Protocol 10'), and Europe has an undeclared border with an ill-defined entity in the island's north. A positive lesson for the Brexit referendum is the possibility that Scotland and Northern Ireland could be seen as regions where the EU *acquis* is *not* suspended even though the country opted out. 'Europe of the regions' thinking would be fitting here, potentially eschewing nationalist fervour as it materialises.

That positive scenario needs political will on the part of the EU institutions that have shown reluctance to perform conceptual shifts – spurring such debilitating conceptual insecurities. The chagrin with which slogans are tweeted on those higher levels tells me that populism could devastatingly begin at the top. If European unity was the project that answered the bloodshed of the Second World War at the end of the colonial era, and if the Brexit referendum is that 'seismic' moment that ushers in a new period, the reckoning that needs to happen, in Britain and the EU, is on a level with colonial mentalities. It needs to consider why Grexit was hammered down but Brexit is being sped up, why suspension of EU laws can be territorial but under no conditions financial, and whether a lack of sovereignty can spur its own sacrificial exceptions – and who, in that case, are the masses of *homines sacri*.

Olga Demetriou
PRIO, Cyprus

'We need local control'

When British citizens voted to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016, the country changed forever. Overnight, Britain's economic, legal and political life, governed by a supranational framework, was thrown up in the air. Much commentary has hastened to look into the future, asking what the referendum results will mean. But unless the focus can be redirected to the present and past, there is a danger that the 'Brexit vote' will be misunderstood.

In England and Wales, many citizens who decided to vote against the EU come from the country's most marginalised socio-economic groups. Their neighbourhoods have been affected by decades of industrial decline, and neo-liberal policies that have driven up problems of housing, unemployment rates and welfare dependence. Under the austerity politics practised by the government since 2010, matters have only become worse for working-class people.

I carried out most of my ethnographic fieldwork in one of the country's most deprived neighbourhoods, a large council estate in the south-east of England. There, people have been disillusioned with politics for decades. Politicians are associated with the world of 'them' that has conspired against the 'us', the world of ordinary people. 'Them' refers to anyone who governs 'us' and who can thus not be trusted – this merges together the people in Westminster as much as those who sit in Brussels.

Electoral withdrawal has been high in England's poor neighbourhoods for decades. But not so with the EU referendum: with a turnout of 72% nationally, more citizens came out to vote in the referendum than in the general elections last year. For the first time since I have known people on the estate, they expressed a dedication to their vote, posting on social media and explaining their decisions to me: 'We need more local control; it's time that we get that back'.

What made the referendum different from any other vote is that it allowed people, perhaps for the first time, to say 'no' to government. Unlike any ordinary election, this was not just about choosing between competing parties, whose differences have become meaningless in any case. For many English and Welsh working-class people, it was a vote to refuse government as such and the structures that keep in place a political establishment both within the EU and the boundaries of one's own country.

As anthropologists, we are well equipped to interpret what our informants tell us and to translate it into a language for those we address. In the context of the EU referendum, this means that we cannot afford to give in to those who have called 'Brexit' voters ignorant and racist, something that nationalist parties such as UKIP can easily exploit. While the 'Brexit' vote is not just exhausted by working-class people, focusing in on this particular demographic makes one thing clear: that for many citizens, the EU vote was a vote of no confidence in the people in power who are meant to serve them.

Insa Koch

London School of Economics

Ironies

When she asked me, in my anthropological persona, to respond in a few words to the British vote to leave the European Union, Sarah Green mentioned irony as one of my fields of expertise. I had two thoughts immediately. The second was whether an anthropologist having irony as a field of expertise is perhaps a little like a fish having water as a field of expertise: for whether we call our business 'irony' or not, the proliferation of different views on the same matter is the very stuff of anthropology.

My first thought, though, was less dispassionate. There are many forms of irony, but my working use of the term places me as being in one part an observer, slightly to the side, able to look on with some tranquillity. But not so here. I am injured in my field of amity, in my kinship and friendships, in my persona as a 'Michael' to my fellow human beings close to me. With most I am sharing an injury, felt as a brutal amputation. We are now a small 'we' who have suddenly lost the right to speak among a much larger 'we' beyond the shores of this island, a 'we' some of whom have a European cover to our passports. With others close to me there is doubt and discomfort about how we will go on. The many shades of the spoken and the unspoken, the everyday civilities and misdirections that allow life to work by overlaying different

opinions with a concord of civility or even affection, are washed away in a harsh high-contrast glare. Or put it another way: a referendum is a machine for crushing delicate complexity into a momentary simplicity.

Enough of that. The centre of Durham, with its university, hospital, courts and county administrators, has been strongly for remaining in the European Union. Here we are elaborately educated and well paid. Many travel adventurously. But a local Labour Party activist, who campaigned to exhaustion to remain in Europe, said that ‘it will be lost in the villages’. The villages are the ex-pit villages close to Durham, where years of neoliberalism have done nothing but depress people’s already poor and precarious lot. Here a media anthropologist would enjoy observing the alternating use of Facebook with meeting in the street or pub as equal means to achieve the same intense sociality. Facebook and everyday talk had a quite uniform tenor, which is captured neatly in one piece of advice that circulated again and again: be sure to take a pen with you to vote, because if you use the pencils they provide they will rub out your Leave vote and check the Remain box instead.

That profound mistrust was evidenced in other rumours, such as the 70,000 Turks ready and waiting for a Remain vote to swarm into the country. But layered with the mistrust and the fear of aliens (‘Europe’, Turks *et al.*) were other and older matters that soon came to light: ‘They’ never listen to us, ‘They’ look after their own, ‘They’ll’ never give us anything. And there, if you like, is irony aplenty. For in that light the act of voting Leave was a vote against a deeply hated government, a vote based in long experience, a vote that has little to do with xenophobia and everything to do with the daily experience of always coming a poor second best.

Michael Carrithers
Durham University

Affective turbulence

Amid Brexit hysteria, the academic temptation may be to hide behind the ‘expert’ mask so derided by the nasty Leave campaign. But besides their dismissiveness, there’s a bigger problem looming for UK-based scholars: our deep personal involvement. As an ‘EU migrant’ studying migration, I’m also caught up the freefall of Brexit – comically depicted on the 4 July cover of the *New Yorker* in the shape of John Cleese silly-walking off the white cliffs of Dover, yet frightening all the same as the world around seems consumed in panic.

Instead of offering ‘expert analysis’ on migration, then, I’d rather write about the emotional charge of this political moment. Let’s start with anger: at the prime minister and his selfish, simplistic referendum; at the mendacity of Brexiteer politicians now covering their tracks; and at UK newspapers that have spouted hatred of migrants and Europe for years only to now cash in on the turmoil. Next follows a rather continental Schadenfreude. Gloat at the voters! Look what you just did! However, chuckling at the madness on Twitter does not protect against another emotion – anxiety, roiled into fear. Which other countries may jump off the cliff towards the 1930s-style mayhem on the rocks below? And where do I stand in this migrant-bashing season as a white northern European? The Murdoch-owned *Sun*, ‘celebrating’ the results, publishes pictures of East European shops while Polish

migrants are attacked and called ‘vermin’; research colleagues receive hate mail while ‘foreign-looking’ people are abused in the street. Meanwhile, employers including my own assure ‘non-UK staff’ they remain valued. I have lived in London longer than I care to remember, yet never before have I felt that invisible line drawn between me and my colleagues. A chill wind sets in – this is visceral and real in a way that until now I have experienced vicariously, through the undocumented African migrants among whom I have worked.

This emotional dislocation mirrors that of my enfranchised neighbours. Set aside the racism fanned by the media and politicians, and it is clear that both sides’ anger, gloating, anxiety and fear keeps feeding off one another. One Twitter meme these furious days reads: ‘Of course foreigners steal your job, but maybe, if someone without contacts, money, or speaking the language steals your job, you’re shit.’ In this callous rejection, repeated everyday in myriad forms in class-divided Britain, fear can easily be whipped into hatred.

Yet as we’re all buffeted by political emotions, social science remains curiously underinvested in exploring them. This includes ‘migration studies’, where academics (including me) often veer towards the bigger picture, assuaging fear by numbers or offering detailed critiques of migration policy. This is all fine, but we also need a wider lens. Not least, we need to craft a better ethnographic understanding of how anger, anxiety, fear and hatred blow through communities, of who fans the flames and who reaps the whirlwind. We need deeper analyses of how destructive emotions globalise and propagate, and how they attach to objects and people: be they refugees, borders, ‘EU migrants’ or Brexiteers stepping over that sheer cliff into the unknown.

Ruben Andersson

London School of Economics and Stockholm University

Scholarship will suffer while nationalist sentiments are stoked

By several professional and analytical criteria, the ‘Brexit’ decision implies a number of dire consequences and deplorable potentials, if assessed through anthropological perspectives. In professional terms, this decision will complicate academic and institutional cooperation between UK and EU anthropologists and other social scientists. Students’ mobility between the UK and the EU might easily deteriorate, EU funding for joint research projects might diminish. After all, the fields of academic and research activities belong to those where the EU has functioned best – and by the way, where UK academic institutions have benefited quite well. Whether the high rate of ERC funding for UK-based researchers, for instance, will be substituted by UK institutions after ‘Brexit’ remains to be seen. By several professional and institutional criteria, this decision will almost certainly have negative consequences for social sciences on both sides of the Channel, and for a fairly small field like social anthropology in particular. This is even more the case, I am afraid, for British social anthropology as a traditional and highly respected core cluster in our global field of research.

By analytical criteria, Brexit may be interpreted as a fairly radical enhancement within the ongoing growth of nationalist and quasi-nationalist tendencies across

Europe, with unforeseeable consequences. While the Front National is preparing for a landslide victory during the next French elections, and while tensions about Catalonia's future status inside or outside of Spain continue, the Brexit decision intensifies nationalist tensions in Europe and re-introduces them to north-western Europe: Among them, a possible new round of Scottish independence/secession and a re-activation of conflicts about Northern Ireland's future represent prospects of such possible new tensions in north-western Europe, and for the rest of western Europe. They will require anthropologists' improved analytical and conceptual attention.

Andre Gingrich
Austrian Academy of Sciences

Brexit and the anthropology of Europe

This Semester, here in the Institute of European Ethnology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (where I now work, after a career in the UK), I have helped run the weekly colloquium of the Institute. The topic for the Semester has been 'European Heritage and Memory Politics'. We have heard much interesting and excellent research. There has, however, been something of a running – though by no means ubiquitous – sub-theme and tone. This has been criticism of European policy and institutions, both the central ones and more national and sometimes even more localised organisations involved in Europeanisation. We heard, for example, careful analyses of the ways in which such policies are contradictory or incoherent, how they may seek to control through cultural heritage, how the very practices of the EU are a managerialist means of making people adopt bureaucratic practices, how policies in practice may serve to sideline the diversity that the EU claims to uphold, how even when diversity is included, it is of a limited kind or seems to not really question established identities. We have heard about Europe as invented by those in power, as in need of post-colonial critique, as something that we should question, dissect and deconstruct.

Little, in my view, has been wrong with such analyses – and, as an anthropologist of Europe, I have myself made some similar arguments and adopted similar strategies. But as Brexit loomed, I found myself muttering inwardly and outwardly on at least one occasion: 'As somebody in a country that might soon cease to be part of Europe, I increasingly think Europe is rather a good thing.' I am left concerned about how our strategies of critique might play into a negative depiction of Europe. OK, maybe little public attention is given to what we write or say in our academic venues. But that cannot be our consolation and is itself a matter that we need to consider, especially in the so-called 'post-factual society' with its dismissal of expertise (e.g. Michael Gove, Minister of Justice and one of the leaders of the Leave campaign: 'people in this country have had enough of experts').

So what should we do? The work of showing how the EU and its policies are received and perceived 'on the ground', how they are locally mediated, is vital for understanding how there can be so little support for the EU – even in areas in which it has apparently provided so much. We need, however, to more pointedly craft our criticisms to also show – when, say, we dissect a European policy or exhibition about Europe – how these could be done better or how we might otherwise help foster

what is worthwhile in the European project. And we need to show how our expertise matters and indeed why facts matter. This does not mean ignoring how facts can be created – one of our specialisms – but let's beware of only deconstructing and ending up in a post-factual world where all inventions are as good as each other.

Sharon Macdonald

Institute of European Ethnology, Humboldt University of Berlin

Beyond 'the lesser evil': a critical engagement with Brexit

We have every reason to be alarmed about the surge of Islamophobia, xenophobia and racism in the Euro-American world after Brexit, even more so on the eve of a possible Trump victory in the USA. Brexit evolved into a meticulous orchestration of resentment, a propaganda machine, manipulatively encouraging voters to find a righteous pride in their socioeconomic marginalisation and to transfer their injury around this impotence into a rage towards an imaginary enemy. The scapegoat was of course the minorities, refugees and migrants, thus promoting denialism as if all that has befallen Britain came from this diabolical outside.

However, even at this juncture, we should keep in perspective that membership of the EU cannot be championed as a cure of xenophobia, labour slavery, austerity, the right to basic income and restrictions on movement. Such a wounded, and already nostalgic, attachment to the EU ideally promotes it as the centre of all discourse, as the beacon of humanism, democracy and internationalism. The pragmatic and apologetic version of this form of attachment adopts the EU by turning it into the lesser evil. It is worth remembering that, just one year ago, another referendum was announced in Greece that would result in the historic Greek vote against austerity, only to be crushed by the EU. Since the EU signed a migrant deportation deal with the Brexit bogeyman, Turkey, just a few months ago, over 2,000 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean while trying to reach 'Europe'. While selling Turkey hopes of EU membership in exchange for further border restrictions and isolationism, the EU-Turkey refugee deal also played into the hands of the Turkish government in its authoritarian attempts to crush democratic opposition and pursue a military solution to the Kurdish issue. In light of this short list of recent events, a vote for the EU cannot be assumed to serve as a vote against austerity, policing and militarised borders.

Is our only choice between right-wing populism and condescending Eurocentric humanism of the EU? Is there a constructive way to engage with the popular discontent with the EU, which is articulated by the political right in the idiom of anti-immigration, where the migrant or the refugee stands as the empty signifier of everything that's wrong with neoliberal capitalism? What did the EU mean for anti-racists and anti-capitalists to begin with? What politically empowering modalities are capable of addressing the loss of these original premises?

We believe that both as anthropologists and proponents of social justice we should seriously engage with such complex questions. Anthropology has a lot to offer to the attempt to fathom why contemporary right-wing populisms are so successful in articulating fragmentary and sometimes contradictory forms of political consciousness and mobilising political feelings for their ends. This is not a call for

another rule of experts – one of the main weaknesses of the Remain campaign – but for critically engaged praxis.

Salih Can Açıksöz

UCLA, Anthropology

Umut Yıldırım

Bogazici University, Sociology

Clashing scales of Brexit

Mainstream newspapers, politicians and commentators across Europe have expressed dejection and bitterness in the face of the Brexit outcome, and avid Brexiteers have typically been portrayed as xenophobes and bigots, Little Englanders or foolish opportunists incapable of understanding the dangerous ramifications and likely Domino effects of their choice. This view is overbearing and inaccurate: complaints about Brussels may be perfectly legitimate, and it is thought-provoking that only right-wing populists have been able to listen to them. Besides, a different perspective may be more enlightening and constructive.

In evolutionary theory, a major transition takes place when smaller entities combine to form an entity at a higher level, relinquishing their autonomy for the greater good. The transition from single-cell to multicellular organisms is the clearest example. The EU holds out a similar promise. The disgruntlement with Brussels witnessed in the British referendum results from weaknesses and failures in the practical implementation of this logic, expressed through an increased distance between power holders and their constituencies – a clash of scales.

Past EU architects have been aware of the dangers of centralisation. In the early 1990s, following the Maastricht Treaty, which aimed at a deeper and stronger integration, a catchword from the Commission was *subsidiarity*. The subsidiarity principle, championed by federalists and Euro-enthusiasts at the time, held that political decisions should always be taken at the lowest possible level, enabling those who were affected by an issue to have a direct influence on its outcome.

Paradoxically, although subsidiarity has subsequently been confirmed and strengthened in EU legislation, it is almost invisible on the public agenda. It disappeared from view around the same time as the Euro was introduced at the turn of the millennium. The perception is that the EU has moved towards centralisation rather than a nesting of scalar levels ensuring local and regional autonomy.

There is a scalar gap between the EU and local communities leading to a feeling of disenfranchisement. This is not merely about immigration to the UK, but about the right to have a political voice. The general formula is this: What is good for Europe is not necessarily good for the UK; what is good for the UK is not necessarily good for Northumberland; and what is good for Northumberland is not necessarily good for the residents of Durham – indeed, what is good for Durham may well be the same as that which is good for Europe. The loss of subsidiarity, sacrificed on the altar of continent-wide neoliberalism and faith in economies of scale, is a major factor in accounting for the strong animosity towards the EU.

Europe is likely to survive as a market place, no matter who leaves. What is at stake is the political project enabling coordination at higher levels and multiple identities at

lower levels. A lesson from Brexit could be that Brussels should take subsidiarity as seriously in practice as it does in its official documents. The resulting Europe would be bumpier and less smooth, but it would enable its citizens to regain a sense of control over their destinies. They would, to paraphrase the anthropologist Anthony Wallace's view of culture, not take part in 'the replication of uniformity, but the organisation of diversity'.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen
University of Oslo

Brexit, populism and the anthropology of austerity

Despite being hailed as 'independence day' by UKIP leader Nigel Farage, there was very little sign of jubilation in Britain after the tumultuous vote to leave the EU. In the immediate aftermath of the vote, a sense of shock and disbelief prevailed. Nobody expected Leave to win; even Leave campaigners seemed stunned. None had prepared for a post-Brexit future beyond simplistic claims about negotiating free trade agreements with the rest of the world once 'freed from the shackles of Europe'. The economic and geopolitical implications of Britain's departure have sent shock waves across the world.

From an anthropology of Europe perspective, Brexit raises key questions about borders, nationalism, sovereignty, security, governance, migration, refugees and, of course, the future of the EU project for European construction. The Leave vote threatens to unravel the UK, but it also poses similar dangers for Europe. Two themes were immediately obvious from the vote. First, the extent to which – like witchcraft allegations – it exposed deep-seated tensions and pre-existing social cleavages. Britain was split not only along regional and class lines, but by generation, profession and education. Even families were divided (despite my best efforts, I failed to persuade my 88-year-old mother to vote Remain. 'I just want Britain to run its own affairs again', she said, before quickly changing the subject).

Second, Brexit has created a deep sense of insecurity among EU nationals living in Britain. A French café owner who has lived in Britain for ten years described to me standing on a crowded platform when his phone rang. As he answered it, he suddenly became acutely aware of his French accent. 'I'll call you back', he said, and shifted nervously onto the train. In Newcastle, Coventry and Birmingham, the English Defence League have staged rallies calling for foreigners to leave, producing tense stand-offs with groups defending refugees. There has also been a notable rise in racist incidents, including East Europeans being beaten up in the streets and Muslim girls being told 'we voted out, so get out'. Brexit has emboldened racists to express their views on the streets and boosted Eurosceptic and far right parties across Europe, many of whom are demanding their own referendums. Besides dog-whistle politics of fear and xenophobic appeals to a nostalgic past without foreigners, the Leave message found a receptive audience among those communities most ravaged by eight years of austerity and the people who felt they had little left to lose by this act of vandalism against the establishment.

Where to from here? Some people have suggested that the referendum is 'advisory' and not binding; that Leave could be halted by a vote in Parliament, constitutional manoeuvring by the Scottish National Party or even a general election. Whatever the

outcome, this constitutional crisis was largely self-inflicted. Historians will look back at this referendum as a turning point in British history and ask, ‘how was it possible that the country’s future was determined by the political gamble and personal ambition of two former Etonians?’

Cris Shore

University of Auckland, New Zealand

Brexit: the European conundrum

The SNP [Scottish National Party] looks like the most credible political force in the UK. (*The Guardian* 26 June 2016)

From my earliest work within a European institution (the European Parliament in 1989) to my current work at the European Central Bank, one question preoccupied me: How do I narrate this remarkable project ethnographically? The question, of course, has numerous subsidiary elements. How do I narrate the historical underpinnings of the project, its moral and ethical exigencies? How do I narrate its intricate institutional architecture and styles of technocratic management? How do I narrate the broader social, economic and cultural transformations animated by integration? These, of course, were not just my questions; they were the questions being incessantly posed within all the institutions of the EU and by countless outside observers. The answers were contested, and at times fiercely contested, like they are now.

And then there was one profound ethnographic question: How are the people of Europe narrating integration on their own terms and for their own purposes? Is integration and its attendant transformations legible to various strata and segments of the European public? In the early 1990s, I sought to answer this question by examining activists experimenting with an emergent politics of Europe, a politics that invoked somewhat paradoxically parochialisms of national, regional, ethnic, religious and/or sectarian affiliation. Some of these political activists viewed the institutions of the EU as contexts in which their aspirations could be achieved; others viewed the EU as anathema to the integrity of their identity-based political projects.

One such figure, Jean-Marie Le Pen, insinuated a particularly volatile narrative. He argued relentlessly that European integration was about the creation of a vast multi-racial and multicultural Europe – enlivened by supranational markets – which he and his supporters, aligned with the ‘extreme right’, zealously opposed.

This narrative derived persuasive power from its ability to speak to what people understood to be their acute personal struggles. This narrative of Europe rests fundamentally on the discrimination of affinity and difference, animating potentially racial, cultural and class antagonisms, particularly in the wake of crises roiling the continent. The immigrant and the refugee serve as the tragic foils in this vexed narrative of Britain and Europe.

The communities and peoples that have been the central preoccupation for anthropologists are now playing a decisive role in the fate of the European project. Can these groupings serve as a force for stability, as *The Guardian* headline suggests sarcastically, or will they further amplify instability? If a robust agenda of pluralism cannot be reasserted politically, then the European project has, I think, failed.

From the outset of my research, I have maintained that we underestimate the radical nature of the European project. The formidable challenge of negotiating Brexit might compel the articulation of the most sober and insightful account of what is or was at stake in the European project for the British people and the rest of us.

Douglas R. Holmes

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Brexit: a view from the Cretan highlands

Will Brexit really happen? Ostensibly an ‘advisory’ device, the referendum could conceivably, especially with the exposure over the Leave campaign’s apparent deceit over the National Health Service and the resurgence of Scottish separatism, give way to a new national consultation. While for now the government appears to refuse that option (and the petition’s creator says that anyway it represents a Leave campaign’s mistaken anticipation of defeat and was subsequently hijacked by Remain supporters), it might just allow a damaged British government to resist EU pressures to put up or shut up – ‘putting up’, coming from those who cannot seriously wish to see Britain secede, being what their pressure tactics seem intended to produce. Hard, humiliating bargaining has begun, and the major parties are both in disarray; probably only the far right will benefit.

I write from a mountain village in Crete, where I have conducted research since 1974. A non-anthropologist might wonder why we should heed Cretan villagers – especially a community that has clashed violently with the law and engaged in the sort of patronage that had the Germans screaming corruption (see Herzfeld 1985, 2016; Tsantiropoulos 2007). But that is just the point. These highly intelligent observers, some of whom have lived abroad, have experienced rough treatment from the EU, for which, as for Greece’s leaders, they now have neither patience nor affection. They also know about hard bargaining and cannot see how any member-state can realistically opt out. They understand the EU through their segmentary clan system; feuds are normal, ducking out an act of shameful irresponsibility. Brexit therefore astonishes them. They already ‘know’ there is no real way out; as one man put it, their government said ‘No’ in the morning and ‘Yes’ in the evening – and the British government, he argued, will be forced to do likewise or suffer dire consequences.

A complex power struggle has begun – again, something these agonistic shepherds understand. They know that violent acts like the murder of Jo Cox can enlarge conflict systemically. Knowing violence intimately, they regard it as ultimately undesirable. Past guest-workers themselves, moreover, they have no fondness for the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, one of several extreme-right parties that immediately saw Brexit as vindicating their anti-immigrant venom, and they seem proud that at a personal level Greeks have generally shown benign attitudes towards refugees and immigrants (see Cabot 2014; Papataxiarchis 2016).

Above all, they understand political disputes as feuds that emerge from the collapse of normative interaction and immediately threaten uncontrollable violence. Both as Greeks in the Civil War and repeatedly as villagers, they have seen it all before. Western European

leaders, scared by the novel unpredictability of factionalism and racism, should heed these mountain shepherds' experienced wisdom. That just might be their best chance to retreat from the brink.

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Nothing unique here but a local assemblage nonetheless: some notes from a 20th-century anthropology

What and what not to take at face value

Social anthropologists supposedly listen to what people say, but they also ask what people are 'saying'. In the 72 hours since, it has become increasingly clear that for many the referendum was an opportunity for registering protest – it was 'about' myriad ills or perceived disadvantages already in existence. Treating Europe as the football, as though *in* or *out* could be defined like goalposts, diverted attention away from the unending imposition of austerity and shrinking of state services (deliberate Tory policy) alongside the changing face of globalisation (zero-hours contracts and novel tax havens), and not least a deficit of imagination in the Labour party. A perfect storm: the combination of these developments over the last half decade with a long-term division within the Tories, where Eurosceptic enthusiasm was being fanned by extremists. Here, rather, holding the referendum at all was 'about' political expediency.

Identifying common undercurrents

Protest votes cast by the middle classes seem to have coalesced round an old-fashioned assault on bureaucracy, as though Europe were already another state to be shrunk. Brexit-seekers were rehearsing a chronic anti-institutionalism that runs through many versions of 'British' culture. In this view, there is no organisation or body of expertise that cannot be upturned to show its inherent elitism. (A kind of vernacular cultural critique.) Elites – not the moneyed classes as such – are for tearing down. Post-referendum, talk of solidarity and unity pathetically fastens itself to an appeal to an amorphous sea of individuals who (seeds for a divisive future already sown) are like-minded.

Understanding what goes into explanations

We cannot just point to British demagogues, despite the mendacious playing with falsehoods, for identifying witches at the borders, that is, Europe in the persons of immigrants. Increasing personalisation – of commerce, politics, the civil service, communications – is more than an artefact of de-institutionalisation. The vernacular idea of the person exudes so much agency it is not surprising that threats to livelihood seem embodied in real-life visible individual persons too. This vernacular emphasis on agency (aka empowerment/autonomy) can even give a negative gloss to relations and relationships. Anthropologists themselves sometimes get carried away, as though relationships could exist without constraints. It has been almost comical listening to leading Brexiters, now they have emerged from their shock at the result, reassuring everyone of continuing relations (with Europe) – as though they had developed a vocabulary with which to make a virtue of it.

A coda on Britain's imperial history. For good or for ill, has the mother country finally turned aside from the indignity of blocking those who want to come, while continuing to go everywhere itself? We did not know back in the 20th century that still early in the new millennium it would so radically cripple its own reach.

Marilyn Strathern
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Knowing how the world works: a post-plural reflection on Brexit

From the point of view of Cambodia, Brexit seems far away. The leading news items of today's *Phnom Penh Post* focus on the upcoming Manila meeting with exiled opposition leader Sam Rainsy, the shut-down of the country's only Cham radio programme, and the eviction of a Vietnamese floating village. Under business news items, there is a brief mention of the surging gold price due to the vote. International news is mainly oriented towards China.

As a Danish citizen, Brexit obviously looms larger. Facebook messages from around the world express a mixture of incomprehension, mirth, rage and fear. Among colleagues, this is mixed with feelings of impotence. One writes: 'And in the meantime academics will keep on spending days publishing papers no one will read.' Another comments that: 'we are clearly not doing very well at communicating our work to "the public"'. I understand the feeling well enough. I wonder, though, if these calls for more public engagement are not offering pluralist solutions to a post-plural problem.

In Denmark, for example, the political dynamics are roughly comparable to those of the UK. The right wing has also taken over. The pluralist solution is to add to the public debate more nuanced perspectives. In fact, though, there have been numerous nuanced analyses. They showed that the turn to the right is not least a reaction to the precariousness of life in many parts of the country. They called for addressing the increasing imbalance between a few cities and the countryside. They repeatedly argued that failure to address these issues might well translate into a hatred of foreigners and the EU. Far from unknown, the general shape of the

problems are almost crystal clear. It's not that intellectuals have not made their calls but that no one picks up the phone.

This is why I would suggest the problem is post-plural. The notion that perspectives add up to a more informed and coherent whole does not hold. Informed analyses do not inform, because they are ignored, or else they are refracted beyond recognition, typically to be fed back as versions of the same reductive ideological parameters they were meant to nuance in the first place – as exemplified by the Brexit campaign. The problem for intellectuals today is how to operate in a post-plural landscape.

Bruno Latour optimistically argued that it was Europe's responsibility to 'recall' the damaging form of modernity it had propagated. Obviously, this 'recall' has not taken place. The UK and the EU is probably about to reap the consequences of its inability to respond to well-identified problems, alongside its meagre political visions. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, the Chinese-backed Cambodian politician-tycoons are translating modernity into a deranged motor of extraction, which conflagrates the environment and rides on the back of human rights violations of every kind. In a post-plural world, knowing how the world works is not knowing how to work the world.

Casper Bruun Jensen
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Statistics, sneers and fears

From the outside perspective that I inhabit as a British expatriate in the Norwegian Academy, the Brexit vote has been predominantly described by two interlinked characteristics. First, it is described as the expression of a backward world-view, underpinned by anti-immigrant sentiment. Second, this sentiment is seen as being expressive of a clash of generations, where a positive younger generation unfortunately lost to their ignorant and irrational elders. The most commonly shared item on my social media in recent days has been a voting chart contrasting the massive majority in favour of Leave among the old with reversed figures among the young.

But do these figures really say it all, as some have claimed? There is another wider gap in voting that has attracted far less attention among those bemoaning Brexit. Those in the top half of wealth and income voted Remain by a huge majority, with an equivalent reversal among the poorest. As a consequence, it's unsurprising that the pillorying of Brexit voters often takes on a nasty undercurrent, such as some of the coverage in the pro-Remain UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, where dog-whistle implications that the Brexit vote is simply expressive of an uneducated and bigoted working class have become the order of the day. Sometimes these home-grown depictions describe Brexit-Britain as a strange and savage land to be viewed with fear and loathing from the outside just as much as their continental European counterparts.

Often the liberal denunciation of Brexit voters smacks of the kind pillorying of allegedly 'irrational' beliefs that anthropologists would be the first to challenge in most other contexts. For example, anthropologists rightly took seriously so-called 'cargo cults' in the Pacific, and attempted to make sense of their meaning from the perspective of those who espoused them and their ambivalent relationship to colonial rule. Refusing to engage with the complex motivations behind the Brexit vote, including a sense

among the poorest of having been treated with contempt in recent years by a political establishment that largely backed remaining in Europe, and consequently caricaturing the vote on the basis of the worst excesses of bigotry that it has unleashed in recent days, may soothe the anxieties of those in favour of the European project by distracting their attention from its increasing loss of support from Manchester to Athens. It is also unlikely to help us to engage with the political challenges of economic crisis and deepening austerity that are to come.

Keir Martin
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Brexit and the middle-class Br-hexis

‘Why the hell would someone vote to be enclosed to ourselves?’

Immediately after the UK referendum results, our social media accounts were filled with comments by friends who voted for BRemain, and their commentary was notably homogeneous. The referendum’s outcome was equated with the death of modern Britain. The values at stake in this referendum for them, such as the sense of global citizenship, the habitus of constant mobility, the ‘diversity’ and the erasure of the geographical obstacles in their social imaginary, are the values of the contemporary British middle class.

Almost nobody we know in Britain who voted BRemain was critical of the EU as a reactionary institution that imposes austerity while promoting policies that serve the interests of the economic elites. For them the EU is a metonym of exclusively positive values and the Brexit voters were to be blamed for their inability to recognise those values.

The material factors that pushed the majority of the working-class people to vote for Brexit, as the social geography of the outcome shows (Kirk and Dunforth 2016), were not included in the critical comments. Perhaps this happened because this middle-class *hexis*, as Bourdieu would say, inclined them not to think through material criteria, as their physical survival is secure.

‘If you’ve got money you vote in... if you haven’t got money, you vote out.’
(Harris, 2016)

This phrase belongs to a woman of Collyhurst, a working-class neighbourhood in Manchester. For her, exit from the EU will not be the catastrophe that others are mourning, as unlike them she feels that she has little to lose. Most Collyhurst residents cannot afford to go abroad, so the free movement that the EU promises is not a concern.

From Greece to the UK, the working class feel bitterly betrayed by the Left. Many social and political theories argue for the ‘end of the working class’. If anything, current events suggest that it is not the working class that has ended: it is its political representation. As both the British and Greek referenda show, the losers from capitalist globalisation keep winning the vote, even against immense negative pressure; but under the current political climate, they still don’t benefit.

Social class and social anthropology

In today's anthropological landscape there is a significant minority calling for the (re)introduction of the concepts of class struggle and class. Since economic relations have shifted towards an increasingly open class polarisation, one could expect that anthropology would take an interest in class as an analytical category (Carrier and Kalb 2015). Today's anthropology must either acknowledge social class struggle or become socially irrelevant.

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North-West and South-East European post-Fordist affect

Early analysis of Brexit suggested that the balance was tipped by 'losers of globalisation': older, disenfranchised working-class people in post-industrial areas of England who (inadvertently?) joined forces with sections of the 'better' classes whose aversion to 'Brussels', I suspect, rests on a wider post-imperial superiority complex.

A key motif invoked to explain working-class support for Brexit was abandonment. These people, it was suggested, yearn for a time when the country was theirs (better: *also* theirs). They recall a promise of meaningful state membership for 'ordinary people', with familiarity and predictable life trajectories, including realistic expectations of 'improvement'. Now they feel abandoned. If correct, this evokes not merely a time before migration from Eastern Europe, but a time before Thatcherism, a time associated with the promises of a welfare state. If the target of resentment became the migrant, much of this portrayal reverberates with a broader phenomenon, sometimes referred to as post-Fordist affect.

I followed the referendum in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where the same period was marked by media warnings about BiH's 'last chance'. Unspecified, everyone here knows that every last chance (again) concerns BiH's chances of obtaining EU candidate status. And a large majority of people in BiH do support this. My research suggests that this support relies at least partly on similar forms of post-Fordist affect that led sections of the English working-class to vote for Brexit. In BiH too, many consider themselves to have been robbed of their futures. They feel abandoned on the crossroads of downward social mobility, war losses and post-Cold War geopolitical transformations. They cast this against the promises of the former Yugoslav socialist welfare state. EU accession is then widely seen as a way of at least partly putting their country 'in order' – something that, it is believed,

cannot be left to domestic politicians. Whenever asked about my prediction about Brexit, my answer that it might well be on the cards was therefore usually met with consternation.

Widespread support for EU accession does not entail general idealisations of the EU. Also, impatience to join is generally tempered by cynicism about the *realpolitik* of accession decisions. Nevertheless, few people in BiH believe joining the EU will make things *worse*.

So it seems that post-Fordist affect may be one factor feeding support for leaving the EU among some people in North-West Europe (and not only in England) *and* feeding support for joining the EU among other people in South-East Europe. A comparative perspective on this phenomenon would need to address a key question: how can promises associated with the welfare state – despite all the evidence of its oppressive ‘normalising’ tendencies, despite its Cold War function as a corporatist structure of domination, despite its ‘cruel optimism’ and despite the fact that even its promises only marked a blip in human history – remain such powerful objects of yearning for many across the continent?

And, yes, that continent includes the islands at its North-Western end.

Stef Jansen

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Conflations of recognition and redistribution

Brexit suggests that desires for a welfare state and desires for a nation-state are not easy to distinguish in everyday life.

Brexit is clearly an expression of a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the political and economic structures governing people in the UK. The framing of these dissatisfactions has taken two broad directions. One explains them as problems of ‘cultural recognition’ – of racism, xenophobia and fear of immigrants. Another focuses on issues of ‘economic redistribution’, whereby precarity and austerity present an underlying cause for Brexit. Here, I am using the terminology of Nancy Fraser (2010) who suggested that social justice in modern states is organised alongside three axes – economic redistribution, cultural recognition and political representation.

Politically speaking, I believe that this is a very relevant distinction to make. Social science studies of post-Yugoslav states focused for many years almost exclusively on questions of ethnic and national belonging. Anthropological research has illuminated how strongly economic disempowerment, austerity and related anxieties affect everyday life. In doing so, it has provided powerful counter-arguments to cultural-racist representations of people from this region as being obsessed with nationalism and ethnic hatreds. Similar aims are present in discussions of Brexit.

Yet, the conflation of recognition with redistribution perhaps needs more ethnographic attention. Post-Yugoslav countries provide a good example of complications that arise from conflating ambivalence over national belonging with a sense of economic disempowerment. Nationalism and racism do not just offer a vent for expressing what, in fact, are economic anxieties. Nor are they simply an expression of a personal hatred in a socio-economic blank space. These two axes of social justice are often difficult to disentangle, speaking about limits of contemporary political imagination – for instance, of envisioning a welfare polity that is not a nation-state.

Brexit marks a rupture in the political and economic organisation of the EU and so provides an opportunity to imagine and to work towards different European futures. The contours of one possible future are already discernible: economic instability, stronger austerity measures, far-right parties dominating public spaces and being elected to governments, secessions and the creation of new states. Although this one seems to be particularly easy to visualise (which is alarming), other futures are also possible. And they should be made intelligible.

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The Brexit vote in regard to Northern Ireland and Ireland

As a longstanding resident, student and citizen of Ireland/Northern Ireland, who has done ethnographic research on both sides of the UK/Ireland land border on the island of Ireland, I am concerned about the impact of the Brexit vote on the people of Ireland, and in particular on the always delicate peace process that has had a strong European/EU context. My first field research in Northern Ireland was on the impact of the single market on cross-border economic and political relations at the eastern end of the Irish/British border, and that research, which also entailed an examination of the boundaries of community, identity and culture in rural and urban Northern Ireland, helped to kick start a wider interest in the anthropology of borders for me. It also quickly showed that the 1992 single market was only one force for fundamental change in Northern Ireland that derived from the Europeanisation of EU integration.

Over the years the apparent cooperation, in the European Parliament, between nationalist leaders of Northern Ireland, combined with the increasing acceptance by government leaders that the Republic of Ireland had a role to play in Irish integration as part of the wider European integration, eventually played a hand in the deliberations that led to the Belfast Good Friday Agreement of 1998. That agreement, widely held to be a 'European' document rather than a British or Irish one, established cross-border governance in key policy areas, all of which are now under threat due to the Brexit vote. Also under threat are the human rights safeguarded in Northern Ireland due to European directives and legislation, long withheld from many Irish nationalist citizens of Northern Ireland. Calls for a referendum on a united Ireland are already being heard from predictable political parties, who have recognised that the 55% NI vote for remaining in Europe was the result of support that crossed sectarian/nationalist lines.

However, a referendum vote may not translate neatly into a vote for a united Ireland, no matter how much people in the six counties may want to stay in Europe. What will happen though is that farmers and other business people, border residents and border crossers, will be faced with a renewed and perhaps more securitised Irish border, affecting all sorts of social, political, economic and cultural intercourse, and re-establishing a geopolitical border symbolic of a nationalist struggle that has taken

800 years to finally get to a relatively peaceful, stable and European future, now to be seen as the location of another Irish terrible beauty.

I conclude with my concern for the role that anthropology and our cognate social sciences can play in documenting these changes, and I ask Europeanists everywhere to use the Brexit tectonic shift to pay renewed attention to how borders, regionalism, nationalism and the state are ever-changing and ever-surprising forces in European island and mainland life.

Thomas M. Wilson

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Colonial traces and possible troubles for global sport

The day after the Brexit referendum result was announced, the three of us were sitting with a number of senior and retired Fijian migrant rugby players at the home of one of them outside Bordeaux, France, drinking kava and engaging in *talanoa* ('shooting the breeze'). Our host kept returning the conversation to the Brexit vote, clearly worried about its implications for the complicated relationship between Fiji, his island nation, and its former colonial power. If the United Kingdom was prepared to turn its back on Europe, what would the implications be for the rest of the world in general, and Fijian migrant rugby players in particular?

For some years now, the European rugby professional leagues have represented a crucial source of employment for young Fijian rugby talent and, in Fiji, a major source of income for families, villages and the nation. Visa regulations have always represented a major barrier to aspirational players, and even rugby professionals based in France must make the time-consuming journey to Paris to apply for a visa before each match in the UK. With the UK's sports industry deeply connected to Europe, any shift away from a single market is likely to have a profound effect on career opportunities.

Our host in Bordeaux framed the issue in the context of a more complicated context of the pre-Brexit protectionist policies that had an adverse impact on Fijians serving in the British military. Like citizens of a number of other Commonwealth nations, Fijian soldiers have long been seen by the British military as malleable, cheap and respectful labour. Heirs to a putative tradition of pre-colonial warriorhood in their own society, Fijians have served with distinction in successive British military campaigns, from the Second World War to the Malaya Insurgency to military interventions in the Middle East. Our friend kept pointing out that while Britain happily employed Fijian soldiers, whom they keep on the lowest rungs of the military and send to the front lines of its more dangerous missions, returned soldiers find it difficult to gain residency in the UK and Fijian nationals are often denied visitor visas to spend time with relatives in Britain. As our host put it, 'we've died for them and they won't even give us a 90-day visa'.

Of course, we have no idea what Brexit will mean for such matters as visas for Fijians (or anyone else), the movement of high-level athletes or the status of soldiers seeking a living in the British military. What we find particularly interesting is that British voters seem to be voting against being embedded in larger structures like the EU and, more generally, globalisation. What they might not have anticipated is that

their lives are already interconnected with those of people living on the other side of the globe – and in ways that transcend the economy.

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Partial repetitions

As a historical anthropologist of the Balkans and of borders, it is hard not to view Brexit through the prism of the multiple dissolutions in the name of self-determination that have frequently contributed to violence, immiseration and/or homogenisation in that region. From a small vantage point in the old Habsburg lands of the former Austrian Littoral (comprising the port of Trieste, the Istrian peninsula and the area around Gorizia), one can easily survey the successive blows to diversity, prosperity and security that took place between the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire at the beginning of the last century and Yugoslavia's implosion at its end.

Many individuals who in their youth called for the end of the Dual Monarchy would later look back with rueful nostalgia on the golden age of mobility, stability and expansive cultural horizons they lost when the empire shattered into smaller national fragments. After 1918, Triestine merchants who had longed for union with their *patria* found their once vibrant multi-ethnic and polyglot port reduced to a provincial (and economically redundant) outpost of Italy. Czechs lost their beloved coastline and maritime window onto the Mediterranean. Slavic peoples in the old Austrian Littoral, confronted with fascist intolerance and assimilationist policies, migrated in large numbers to the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The subsequent upheavals of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath occasioned much more brutal changes, ones that would galvanise supranationalism in the guise of Yugoslav federalism and socialism and the broader desire for European unity and peace that eventually led to the EU.

On 25 June 1991, the wealthiest republics, Slovenia and Croatia, seceded from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The deep social, political and economic cleavages created by the subsequent conflicts would, in turn, make membership of the EU the hope and aim of all the former Yugoslav republics. There exists, then, a longstanding cycle of dismantling, nostalgia for paradise lost, and a search for new solutions and unities. Each swing of the pendulum in the Balkans between a supranational and a national(ist) solution has resulted in ever tighter circles of belonging and further diminishment of pluralist societies.

How the effects of Brexit will play out in Europe remains to be seen. Certainly, neither Europe writ large nor Britain writ small are mere mirrors of the Balkans and as scholars we must tread carefully with historical analogies. Yet after years of prognostications about a Grexit, we instead find that it is one of the most prosperous members that has made the momentous first move to leave the Union. Likewise, Yugoslavia's dissolution began when the wealthiest republics broke away first, contrary to expectations that a conflict would begin in the federation's poorest area, Kosovo.

Anthropologists have long been border crossers *par excellence*, moving between diverse methods and theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. One of our many

challenges in the present moment is to put those skills to good use by working for dialogue across the new borders being drawn across Europe.

Pamela Ballinger
University of Michigan

Independence is not always what it seems

It was a joyful moment when Latvia declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1990. No more directives from Moscow, the future was clear: a national state integrated into the European Union and NATO. Today, less than two decades after independence, hit by massive financial crisis and exhausted by austerity measures, many of Latvia's residents have sought livelihoods abroad. Nothing that the national(ist) state did to 'take back the country' in the form of restrictive citizenship and language policies could put bread on the table and prevent people from leaving.

I am writing this from a small town in northeast England, where being a Latvian citizen can be unpleasant at times. This town voted overwhelmingly in favour of leaving the European Union. Media coverage used one word to explain it: immigration. Indeed, this agricultural and food processing area has seen significant labour migration from Eastern Europe, including from Latvia. The rest is almost textbook material: farm managers say that migrants work hard, while local inhabitants say that migrants take away their jobs, that they cannot get a doctor's appointment, that the town has changed beyond recognition, and that they are accused of being racists when they try to make their voices heard. Even some of Latvia's citizens living in this town have come to share the sentiment and wish to prevent others from coming (which earns them the scorn of Latvian elites observing from afar).

But the employers who profit from migrant labour and the property owners who drive up housing prices are elusive and invisible in local politics. Citizens Advice Bureau reports about urgent social policy issues disappear in bureaucratic corridors. The long history of labour exploitation is slipping from memory. 'People compare themselves to others, they don't think historically', says a local historian.

The fact that people develop local understandings of global processes is of no surprise to anthropologists. For much of anthropology's history, anthropologists have translated local understandings, especially those of the marginalised, into critiques of economic or political power. The focus on people's voices has more often than not been connected with left-liberal political projects. These, along with other expert discourses, are losing legitimacy. Here, it is different entrepreneurs of voice – unclear whether guided by political ideology or personal ambition – that have amplified soundbites of local knowledge to the point of rupture.

Making this place feel English will not address the grievances that people have. Nationalism certainly did not address the grievances of those Latvians who, despite their love for the nation, are working in English fields and factories. 'Taking back control' thus might be an attractive illusion, but inhabitants of this town are nevertheless convinced: 'we've done it before, we can do it again'. It is not yet clear to me how local inhabitants understand their place in the world. But it is the task of anthropology to understand how people form their understandings of the world

and of themselves in it. For that, it is crucial to bracket anthropology's desire to connect local understandings with familiar critiques of power and political ideologies.

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